

“Revelation 2 – Church at Pergamum” | Revelation 2:12-17

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(Discussion questions on page 10)

Please turn to the Revelation 2 reading, so that you can follow along with me, to make sure what I am saying is trustworthy and true. It can be found on page 1029 in the pew bibles or in the back of the bulletin.

Intro

I wonder how you feel when someone you don't know asks you about your faith?

Do you boldly step up to the plate and swing with all your might, explaining the gospel with clarity and just the right amount of charisma?

Or like me,
do you slightly recoil and worry about what this person will think about you?
Thinking about all the names they might call you. Fearing the rejection of the world.

Underlying this question, is the question that I really want to ask you, the thing I really want you to be thinking about, and that is:

- who or what are you afraid of?

Now I'm not talking about are you afraid of heights? Or, like my two-year-old recently started experiencing, the fear of monsters at night.

The question is; are you more afraid of the world or of God?
Are you more concerned about what people will think of you, what people could do to you, than what the one who wields a sharp two-edged sword in his mouth will think of, or do to, you?

Context

This is a question that faced the church in Pergamum. Just for some context, Pergamum was a city very similar to Washington D.C.

During the time of the Roman Empire, Pergamum was the capital city of the province of Asia, which is modern day Türkiye. It was a highly religious and cultural city, boasting of many temples including a temple for the Roman Emperor. It had the famous Pergamum library, which is where our word “parchment” comes from. There was also a healing center dedicated to the God of healing, which functioned much like a hospital. Pergamum was a thriving city.

So, what does Jesus have to say to the church in a city like that, a city like ours?

We are going to work through this passage in 3 parts. First, by looking at the external pressures to the church. Then, second, looking at the internal danger to the church. And third, looking at Jesus' warning to them.

1. The Reason for love
2. The Rule of Love
3. [Comments]

1. Point 1 - The Reason for love

Let's begin with the external pressures that the church at Pergamum were under.

Look at verses 12 and 13 again with me,

¹² *"And to the angel of the church in Pergamum write: 'The words of him who has the sharp two-edged sword. ¹³ 'I know where you dwell, where Satan's throne is. Yet you hold fast my name, and you did not deny my faith even in the days of Antipas my faithful witness, who was killed among you, where Satan dwells."*

That sounds pretty ominous doesn't it.

Two-Edged Sword

First off, you have this striking phrase *"The words of him who has the sharp two-edged sword."* Immediately we are put on alert. This is not the words of him who is known for giving out candy. Or of him who gives good back scratches. No, this sounds more like someone ready for battle.

Back in chapter 1 of the book of Revelation Jesus is described as having a "sharp two-edged sword" coming from his mouth.

We get a similar image in Hebrews 4:12, where we read *"the word of God is living and active, sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing to the division of soul and spirit, of joints and of marrow, and discerning the thoughts and intentions of the heart."*

So, this sharp two-edged sword are the words of Jesus, which divide right from wrong, good from evil, the innocent from the guilty.

A normal two-edged sword is pretty dangerous. But a two-edged sword that comes from the mouth of Jesus, which conveys his word of judgement, and pronounces God's verdict of your life. That is much more terrifying!

What, then, is the message that we get from the words of him who has this sharp two-edged sword? Is it a word of judgement or comfort?

Satan's Throne

The message that Jesus delivers begins with a word of praise.

He begins by praising the saints in Pergamum for remaining faithful to him in the face of difficulties coming from outside the church.

What were these difficulties?

The first external pressure to their faith was the pagan culture and idol worship around them. They lived in a city devoted to the worship of false gods.

Jesus describes Pergamum as the dwelling place of Satan because it was a city full of temples to the Greek gods.

- There was the Temple of Dionysus, the god of fertility,
- the temple of Athena, the god of wisdom,
- There was the healing temple, dedicated to the god of healing, Asclepius(uh-sklee-pee-uhs).
- But most notably there was a massive structure known as the great Altar, which was an altar to Zeus and Athena. This is probably what Jesus is referring to as the throne of Satan, as it looks like a massive throne.

But not only were there temples to the Greek gods, but Pergamum had one of the first temples built to worship and honor the Roman Emperor, Augustus. And later, Emperor Trajan.

By all accounts, the citizens of Pergamum were searching for God in all the wrong places. And what they found instead, was the throne of Satan.

What this meant was that in a very real and tangible way, Satan was dwelling among them. He was enticing them to worship false gods. And he had infiltrated the halls of earthly power.

One pastor writes, Pergamum “was therefore not simply the place where Satan existed, but the place where Satan wielded a very special authority. (Pergamum) was a place where the anti-God-forces of the universe were at their most authoritative and most powerful.”¹

For the church at Pergamum there was immense cultural pressure to worship false gods. Can you imagine what it must have felt like to be a Christian in this city? With all the cultural pressures to go along to get along. If you weren't socializing at the great altar, you might have been overlooked for that job. Or left out of the cool parties.

Persecution

But it gets much worse, because from this, they faced a second pressure, the external pressure of physical persecution.

¹ William Barclay, *“Letters to the Seven Churches”*, Westminster John Know Press, 35.

This is what we read regarding Antipas. He was a faithful witness to Jesus who was killed as a martyr, because of his faith in Jesus.

This is not the mundane persecution that we in the West experience, as we fear being rejected socially, or being labelled as weirdo or worse as a bigot. No this is much, much, worse! This is the very real threat of dying for the sake of Jesus Christ.

A threat that many Christians throughout the world know all too well. Lord have mercy upon them!

Hold Fast

And yet despite all of these external pressures; of the culture surrounding them and of the threat of physical persecution, the saints in Pergamum continued to hold fast to the name of Jesus and they did not deny their faith in him.

They didn't bow their knee or proclaim that "Caesar is Lord." Not even when threatened with death.

They were not afraid of the consequences of living in opposition to the world. They were not afraid of being known as followers of Jesus. They were not afraid of holding tightly to Jesus even if it meant letting go of the world.

This is because they were not afraid of world. They were not afraid of what the world could do to them. Because they knew it was far better for them to be known in Christ than to be known by world. They knew that the weight of glory is far greater than anything the world has to offer.

Application

Do you have this same perspective? Or are you afraid of the world? Do you feel the pressures of world around you?

We live in a similar situation to the church in Pergamum. In other parts of the New Testament, Satan is described as the God of this age (2 Cor. 4:4) and the ruler of the kingdom of the air (Eph. 2:2). We, just like them, are living in Satan's world, as we wait for Jesus to return. And Satan prowls around seeking for someone to devour.

We too are faced with the external pressure to turn away from God and to worship idols. We have the same cultural pressures. Our idols are not always made of stone, but we all too frequently sacrifice ourselves, our time, our dignity, our spouses, our children, to the gods of success and status, to the gods of safety and security, to the gods of freedom and autonomy.

Brothers and sisters in Christ, hold fast. Do not deny your faith in Jesus when faced with opposition from the world.

As we read in the Psalmist last week, better is one day (just one day!) in the house of the Lord than a thousand elsewhere. It can be hard to wait for something unseen. But we have the assurance that because Christ has been raised from the dead, we too will be raised to be in glory with him.

So point 1 – Jesus praises them for holding fast in the face of the external pressures.

2. Point 2 - The Rule of Love

But there weren't just pressures from the world outside of the church, there were also dangers coming to them from inside the church.

We read this in verses 14 and 15,
look at those verses again with me,

¹⁴ But I have a few things against you: you have some there who hold the teaching of Balaam, who taught Balak to put a stumbling block before the sons of Israel, so that they might eat food sacrificed to idols and practice sexual immorality. ¹⁵ So also you have some who hold the teaching of the Nicolaitans.

Even though they had been faithful when faced with external pressures, holding fast to Jesus in the face of persecution, it turns out they have not been so vigilant against the internal dangers. As we read that within their church there were some people who were teaching and leading others to sin.

Balaam and the Nicolaitans

Who is Balaam? You ask. Good question! Balaam, is someone we meet in the Old Testament, right back to the 4th book of the bible, the book of Numbers. You may have heard of his more infamous donkey.

In Numbers, chapter 22, we read Balaam was a prophet who was hired by Balak the king of the Moab. Balaam was hired to curse the people of Israel, because they were positioned on the boarder of Moab, ready for battle.

However, because of God's favor on Israel, instead of cursing Israel, Balaam blessed them. This happened after God spoke to Balaam through the mouth of his donkey.

But in the very next chapter, just as soon as he has blessed them, Balaam then "encouraged Israel to engage in sexual immorality and idolatry."² (Numbers 25, see also 31:16)

This is what is happening in the church in Pergamum. Those who were holding to the teaching of Balaam were eating food sacrificed to the Greek gods at the great altar. And they were following the culture around them by practicing sexual immorality.

² [Revelation | Commentary | Brian J. Tabb | TGCBC](#)

It is the same for those who hold to the teaching of the Nicolaitans. We don't know much about them, except what we read here, and earlier in the letter to the church in Ephesus, where Jesus says he hates the works of the Nicolaitans.

Both of these groups within the church believed that you could have your cake and eat it too. That you could be a follower of Jesus and live a secular pagan life, conforming to the patterns and accepted standards of the world, rather than to God.

As they were holding on to Jesus with one hand, they were holding on to false teaching with the other.

They wanted to satisfy themselves with the earthly pleasures of this life, so much so, that it was threatening their opportunity for heavenly joy.

They were afraid of missing out. They saw how much fun their friends and fellow citizens were having and they didn't want to miss out.

Application

I wonder if this speaks to you? Are you afraid of missing out on what this world has to offer? Or are you willing to give up earthly pleasures to gain heavenly joys?

Let us not be too proud and haughty, too big headed and egotistical, to think that this couldn't be a problem in this church. That we couldn't succumb to the same types of internal dangers to our church.

It might not be as explicit and tangible, as someone teaching from the pulpit that these sins are ok. I hope and pray that it would never be so. But just look at the rapid capitulation and downfall of the mainline protestant churches.

They are a reminder to us, that we must continue to hold fast to Jesus.

Sum – So, 1. there were external pressures. And 2 there were internal dangers. This brings us to our third point, Jesus' warning.

3. Point 3 - [Comments]

Look at this warning in verses 16 and 17 again with me,

¹⁶ Therefore repent. If not, I will come to you soon and war against them with the sword of my mouth. ¹⁷ He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches. To the one who conquers I will give some of the hidden manna, and I will give him a white

stone, with a new name written on the stone that no one knows except the one who receives it.'

His warning is simple: Repent!

You have been walking down the wrong path for far too long, now is the time to turn back, and follow the narrow path once again.

You have let the culture around you influence you far too much, and you have allowed false teaching to come within your walls. Enough is enough Jesus say, it is time to stop.

And if they do not repent, then he who has the sharp two-edged sword in his mouth will come and war against them. They are fighting words.

Now you thought being pulled over by the police was scary, just wait till you come face to face with the judgement of God. The state may wield the power of the sword, but Jesus has the power of God. The state may have the power over your body, but Jesus has complete authority over your body and your soul.

Now is the time to repent!

But notice what comes to those who do repent. For those who do repent, who overcome the external pressures and internal dangers, then they will receive a reward.

1. First, they will be given the hidden manna.

Manna was the food that God provided Israel when they roamed the desert for 40 years. It was bread that rained down from heaven. (Ex. 16:4) This manna in the wilderness was a symbol pointing towards Jesus, who is the bread of life. The manna symbolizes our dependence on God for life, in this world and in the world to come.

So, what Jesus is saying is that the reward for those who rejected the meat offered to the false idols in this world, they would eat the bread of God in the world to come.³

Second, they will be given a white stone, with a new name written on it. Now, theories abound as to what the white stone and the new name signify. It could be a symbol for innocence and acquittal from a judge. It could symbolize a day of victory or an invitation to a feast. Whatever the case maybe, it conveys some guarantee of being blessed by God.

So those who repent, and overcome the world, they will be sustained, provided for, and blessed by God. They will receive all the spiritual blessings of knowing and being known by the creator and ruler of all things.

Application

³ William Barclay, *Letters to the Seven Churches*, 41.

This warning to repent is not just a word for them, it's also a word for us. It is far too easy to succumb to the temptations of the world, the flesh, and the devil. Or to go along to get along with the world.

Illustration - Personal Finance

I am not sure how this applies specifically to you in your life, and what you need to repent of, but I'd love to talk with you about some time. But personally, something I have been thinking about is money. One of my favorite things to think about and talk about is personal finances. I like to think and talk about things like the difference between a 401k and a Roth 401k, the pros and cons of the latest personal finance guru. I willingly choose to read Berkshire Hathaway annual reports, and I enjoy it.

I wasn't always like this. Before I got married, money would come into my bank account and then just as quickly go out. And I wouldn't really think about things like my retirement or long-term saving goals. But then in our first year of marriage, the reality of my new life stage hit me, and a switch was flipped in my brain. I started reading and couldn't stop reading about how to manage my money well.

But over time, as I have examined my heart, I've reflected on what my motivations and intentions are. What is my obsession with money really all about?

- Is it about having safety and security so that I don't have to worry about the future, rather than trusting in God that he will provide?
- Is it about having enough money to buy things that will satisfy the desires and longings of my heart, rather than seeking satisfaction in God?
- Is it about status? And having an identity as someone who has it all together, rather than holding onto my identity in Jesus Christ?

I think it is all of these things. As ultimately, I am asking money to do things that only God alone can do. I am being influenced far too much by the world around me, which is leading me away from the cross of Jesus Christ.

I need to repent. Lest I drift away, slowly letting go of the name of Christ and denying my faith in him.

What that means practically is that I need to stop indulging the desires of my flesh, I need to stop seeking the pleasures of this world, and instead I need to hold fast to Jesus.

And I need to tell him I am sorry. Not just because my pastor tells me to, but because I am truly remorseful, and full of sorrow, because my heart is heavy with the weight of knowing that I have displeased and hurt someone that I love, my lord and my God.

And I need to ask for his forgiveness. Not taking for granted his grace and mercy, but knowing that without his forgiveness that my future will be dwelling with Satan.

But God, being rich in mercy, because of the great love with which he loved ME, even when I was dead in my trespasses, he made me alive together with Christ—by grace I have been saved.⁴

By his grace I was forgiven, by his grace I continue to be forgiven, and by his grace I will be forgiven of all my sins when I come face to face with him on that last day.

Conclusion

Brothers and Sisters in Christ, what are you afraid of?
If God is for you who can be against you?

My prayer for you and for me is that your grip on Jesus would get tighter and tighter.
That you would care less and less about the names that the world could call you.
That you would more and more be willing to give up your fleeting earthly desires, that you might gain more and more heavenly joy and fulfillment.
And ultimately, that by the power of the Holy Spirit, we would be found faithful.

Let me pray for us.

⁴ Eph. 2:4-5, paraphrased.

Discussion Questions

What does text say?

1. Who is the author of the letter to the church in Pergamum?
2. How is the city of Pergamum described in verse 13?
3. What is the church applauded for?
4. What are they reprimanded for?

What does the text mean?

5. Why is it significant that the church held fast to their faith in Jesus?
6. Why does Jesus tell them to repent? (what might they need to repent of?)
7. What do you think the hidden manna and white stone with a new name are?
(there are no wrong answers on this question as scholars are completely divided in what they actually mean)

How does it apply to you?

8. What external pressures of the world do you face in your life?
9. What internal dangers or false teaching might we as a church be tolerating?
10. What do you need to repent of? What does that look like practically for you?